

# Roman peace and imperialism

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Augustus' white marble Altar of Peace, the *Ara Pacis*, is a famous monument of his reign. But he came to power as a result of bloody civil war, and spent much of his reign expanding the boundaries of his empire. Hannah Cornwell examines the nature of the peace, or Peace, that he promoted.



The identity of this figure from the *Ara Pacis* is disputed, but one plausible identification is that this is a representation of Pax (Peace) herself.

Photograph: Matthew Nicholls

## A cult of Peace

On 30 January 9 B.C., the senate dedicated the Altar of Augustan Peace (the *Ara Pacis Augustae*), familiarly known simply as the *Ara Pacis*. This altar had been vowed because of Augustus' successful management of affairs in Gaul and Spain (*Res Gestae* 12). The altar represents the earliest extant attempt to express an idea of imperial peace as well as for a cult to Peace at Rome. This did not mean that the Romans did not have a place for peace prior to this point. Indeed, maintaining good relations with the gods – the *pax deorum* – was considered vital for securing the best possible position for the state, along with a show of a strong military position from which to negotiate with other states. Yet, whilst the Romans expressed their relationship with the divine in terms of peace (*pax*) bestowed by the gods, and in turn conceptualized their relations with opponents through

their own bestowal of *pax*, the concept was not envisioned as a deity until very late.

The worship of what we may consider abstract concepts, such as 'agreement', 'hope', 'loyalty', 'good fortune', and 'freedom', was well-attested from the late fourth century B.C. *Concordia* (Concord), *Spes* (Hope), *Fides* (Loyalty), *Fortuna* (Good Luck), and *Libertas* (Freedom) were worshipped alongside protective deities such as Jupiter the Striker (Feretrius), Jupiter the Victor, Jupiter the Stayer (Stator), Mars, Victoria, and Bellona (goddess of War). *Pax*, however, only appears to have gained contemporary relevance and personified expression under Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., when a small silver coin explicitly depicted *PAXS*. This coin is not in itself evidence of a cult to Peace, but it does indicate possibly the first attempt to depict the concept in a similar way to other divine qualities, who had long been personified on coinage. The

legend (the inscription) of *PAXS* on the coin suggests it was necessary to aid viewers in the identification of the female head, which otherwise has no distinctive features or attributes. The two clasped hands on the other side elucidate what this 'Peace' was intended to evoke: agreement and unity. Peace was now relevant enough to contemporary political discourse to be promoted on a coin.

## Peace, Victory, and empire

Caesar, after five years of civil war, could well claim to have brought peace to Rome and indeed to the empire, when he became Dictator for life in 44 B.C.. This peace, however, was not to last, and his assassination on 15 March in the name of *libertas* was a rejection of his rhetoric of peace and autonomy. Yet peace would continue to be one of the key concepts through which competing Roman politicians and generals pressed their cause on behalf of the *res publica*. A year later, Marcus Tullius Cicero would declare in a letter to Brutus:

*I was all for freedom, which is nothing without peace. I thought peace could be achieved through war and arms.*

Roman peace, whilst assuring the existence of a calm and stable state, was nevertheless something won through war and victory over opponents. The culmination of this relationship of victory and peace during civil war can be seen in list of Roman triumphs, which records two ovations in 40 B.C. for Octavian and Mark Antony because they had made peace with each other. Here peace is celebrated as victory not because an opponent had been defeated, but because two Romans had reconciled (thereby avoiding the implicit defeat of Romans).

Such a presentation was justified during what was in reality, if not in name, civil war. However, after Octavian's defeat of Antony there was no one left with whom he could make peace. Instead, he celebrated the achievement of peace as an absolute. At Nicopolis, the victory city built after the battle of Actium (31 B.C.), spoils of ship rams were dedicated to Mars

and Neptune by Octavian as victor in the war waged on behalf of the *res publica*. Yet there is no opponent named. Instead at the centre of the monumental Latin inscription were the words: 'with peace won by land and sea' (*pax parva terra marique*).

The idea of Roman rule over its empire as an accomplishment of peace, is encapsulated in the following lines from Vergil's *Aeneid*:

*You, Roman, be mindful to rule the peoples with your power (these will be your arts) to impose a practice for peace, to spare the subjugated and to vanquish the arrogant.*  
(*Aeneid* 6.851–3)

As Anchises reaches the culmination of his catalogue of the great and the good of Rome's 'future' during Aeneas' tour of the underworld, he concludes that whilst others may excel at sculpture, rhetoric, and astronomy, Rome's 'arts' will be imperial rule over the world, imposed as a rule of peace. This peace is characterized as sustaining those who submit to Rome's control and crushing those who do not. For a modern audience this presentation raises the question of how (and indeed why) the Romans conceptualized their empire as a rule of peace. World domination does not seem very peaceful.

It is worth while noting that at its root Roman imperial practice was concerned with the exercise of *imperium*. This Latin word, from which the modern terms 'empire' and 'imperialism' derive, denotes the constitutional power held by Rome's most senior magistrates, enabling them to carry out tasks on behalf of the state, such as raising and commanding an army. It was through this power that, according to Vergil's Anchises, Rome would rule over other peoples. Over time, the concept also gained a greater association with territorial control, as the exercise of power over an ever-increasing sphere of operation. But how did such a concept become associated with peace?

Anchises' vision of Rome's imperial 'mission' may appear to be a product of the Augustan age. Indeed, Augustus himself would boast in his *Res Gestae* that

*when peace was achieved by victories by land and sea throughout the whole empire (imperium) of the Roman people,*

he closed the gates of Janus. But in fact such a depiction of Roman imperialism was not entirely novel. The text of a Roman law passed in 58 B.C. concerning the sacred island of Delos, the *lex Gabinia Calpurnia*, provides insight into the way an imperial language of peace emerged in the republican period. This law states that the island received freedom and immunity from taxation thanks to the state (the *res publica*) being well administered, the

empire (*imperium*) increased, and with peace (*pax*) established throughout the whole world. Such a vision of peace over the world, of which Delos' tax immunity is but one illustration, was presented in the light of Pompey's successful reorganization and administration of the Mediterranean and eastern empire, which served to bring peace, both as the termination of conflict and the state of stability. To be *sub imperio populi Romani* ('under the rule of the Roman people') was, Rome claimed, to know stability and freedom from external threat and violence.

### ***Pax Augusta – Pax Romana***

Peace as an expression and justification of empire clearly existed prior to the creation of an imperial system, although the civil wars of the 40s–30s B.C. shifted the focus to an internal discourse of power relations between Romans. Once Augustus had established himself as a virtual sole ruler, the dynamics of power shifted to express the relationship of the empire to the emperor as the centre of power. The Altar of August(an) Peace commemorated Augustus' successful management of the empire and together with the closing of the gates of Janus promoted a message of imperial rule through a rhetoric of peace. Moreover, it was not merely that peace was celebrated as an achievement that is of note, but that it was defined as 'august' (as in the case of the *Ara Pacis Augustae*), making it a personal quality of the *princeps*.

As successive appointments of emperors reaffirmed the imperial system, so too was a message of imperial peace reiterated as a sign of imperial achievement. Claudius, for example, was offered a golden statue of *Pax Augusta Claudiana* by the city of Alexandria (A.D. 41), whilst Nero associated himself with the peace of Augustus in his celebrations of his Parthian 'victory' (A.D. 66), minting coins depicting gates of Janus and the *Ara Pacis Augustae* as contemporarily significant monuments. Vespasian built a monumental forum-complex to Peace at Rome from the spoils of war (A.D. 75).

Peace was, then, a means of justifying and maintaining Rome's control over the members of its society. Yet Roman writers did not view this imperial message as unproblematic. Indeed, it was precisely because peace was a key facet of imperial power that Tacitus, who reflected critically on empire and the nature of imperial governance, sought to expose the lie:

*These plunderers of the world, after exhausting the land by their devastations, are probing even the sea: if their enemy is wealthy, they are stimulated by greed; if poor, by ambition. Neither East nor West has*

*sated them; they are the only people who covet with the same passion wealth and poverty. To plunder, slaughter, steal under false names, they call 'empire' (imperium), and the desolation they create, 'peace' (pax).*

(*Tacitus Agricola* 30.5)

Tacitus places these words of condemnation in the mouth of the British chieftain, Calgacus, in order to highlight the harsh realities of imperial rule disguised in the trappings of peace from the perspective of the subjugated. Not only does Tacitus demonstrate the tension between the veneer of empire and the actuality, but also that the relationship of the two concepts, 'empire' and 'peace', lies at the heart of Roman imperial ideology. Even as a critique of empire, Tacitus' words highlight the integrity of peace to a Roman view and justification of empire. Indeed, it was a message that was accepted, at least ostensibly, by communities throughout the empire: we find during the Augustan period altars and commemorations to *Pax Augusta* in Italy, Gaul, North Africa, and Asia Minor. This acceptance of Augustus' brand of imperial ideology, throughout the Mediterranean, illustrates how Rome achieved a rule of peace over its empire.

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